

Uncover the Decision Makers in the Foodservice Industry



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Business: Restaurant Menu Suggestions That Sell

Well-written restaurant menus are terrific sales tools that use a bit of consumer psychology to help boost check averages.

By Cheryl Sterman Rule, Special to R&I -- Restaurants and Institutions, 10/1/2008

It's no secret that printed menus and overhead menu boards play a vital role in whetting a customer's appetite—and often help decide their orders. After all, says Subway franchisee and business instructor Nancy Swanger, "Your menu is your primary sales tool." Swanger, who owns a Subway franchise and also is an associate professor in the School of Hospitality Business Management at Washington State University at Pullman, says take note: the average customer spends just over 100 seconds looking at a menu.

With the economy putting a tight squeeze on bottom lines, well-planned and well-formatted menus can be a smart tactic. They can increase the odds that guests will order efficiently, correctly and perhaps even exactly what the operator hopes they'll select.

Upfront Decisions

At Baker Bros American Deli, a 16-unit fast-casual chain based in Dallas, customers queue up along a center aisle, grab a printed menu and make their way toward the five blackboard-style menu boards by the registers. The handheld menus mimic the menu boards hanging overhead—a repetition done very much by design. "When we went through our initial research," says Tom Dahl, the company's president and COO, "we visited a lot of fast-casual and fast-food restaurants." He found that inconsistencies between the printed menus and the overhead boards tended to generate confusion when guests got to the point of sale. "We wanted to make sure our system was as logical as possible."

The Baker Bros brand continues to evolve, as it has since the first unit opened in 1999. But in the past six months, as the economy has further softened, Dahl says there has been a refocusing on many aspects of the business. For one thing, he's paying closer attention than ever to how the menu is structured. When listing specialty sandwiches on menus and boards, he says, the most popular and most profitable items are listed first. Those with higher food costs get pushed to the end—the thinking being that by then, many minds already have been made up.

Ryan Timmons, general manager of Zebu Forno, a trio of European-style bakery-cafes in New Jersey, undertook a complete menu overhaul in May. He follows a similar strategy. Since the price of chicken has dropped, the cost of goods in his chicken panino now hovers just over \$2, with his other panini costing around \$3.25. Given that they all sell for \$8.79, the chicken—with its more-favorable profit margin—holds the panini menu board's top slot. By the same token, higher-end coffee drinks lead off the coffee menu board, and the dozen bagels, at \$9.99, are listed before individual bagels with butter.

\$\$\$ and Sense

The order in which foods appear on the menu is only part of the complex psychology that plays into consumers' decision-making process. Wording and descriptions have a role, as does the system for listing prices. Sybil S. Yang, a doctoral student at Cornell University's School of Hotel Administration, recently co-authored a study on how price presentation influences consumer behavior. (The study is scheduled to be published in the *International Journal of Hospitality Management* later this year.) Yang looked at whether there was a difference in the amount of money customers spent when prices were listed in one of three ways—for example, \$20.00, 20., or twenty dollars. The center format, with neither a dollar sign nor the word "dollar," yielded the highest checks, with an average bump of 8.15%.

Gregg Rapp, a menu engineer and restaurant consultant in Palm Springs, Calif., offers a possible explanation. "A dollar sign reminds people of money," he says. If a menu with 75 items has 75 dollar signs, consumers are more likely to focus on cost rather than on the food. "Dollar signs are a big mistake," says Rapp.

Even though it is visually tidy, right-justifying prices on a menu or menu board may also be a bad idea. Why? It allows customers to identify immediately which items are the least expensive and order easily based on price considerations alone.

Rapp suggests the following: "Take an item, put a description, put a period, and then put two spaces before the price. This way, the price is part of the menu and doesn't stand out." If someone is looking for the cheapest item, they will still find it, but not as quickly—and perhaps by the time they've found it, their appetites will have led them to a costlier option.

Swanger agrees. "You want to mix up the items so they can't be rank-ordered by price," she says.

Rapp also advises operators to add descriptions to menu items wherever possible, even on drive-thru boards. The more copy on a menu, he says, "the lower the perceived price."

Half a Chance

Baker Bros recently added half-sized portions for all of its specialty sandwiches, deli sandwiches and salads. "The product is one-half to two-thirds the size of the whole portion, and the price is roughly 75% of the full price," says Dahl. This solution appeals to customers with smaller appetites and skinnier pocketbooks, but it's also a real profit-maker for the restaurant from a food-cost perspective. "Those items are selling extremely well," Dahl says. The half-size options are displayed prominently on the printed menus and on menu boards.

Finally, no matter how well-designed a menu, don't forget to appeal to customers' sense of spontaneity. Though his menu redesign has been an unqualified success, Zebu Forno's Timmons says that the piles of wrapped cookies, homemade crispie treats, crumb cakes and blondies set out by the registers are irresistible to guests. "We get \$300 to \$600 each day in add-on sales from this area alone."

Fit to a Z

Brian Wansink is an expert in the minutiae of consumer psychology. Renowned for his 2006 book "Mindless Eating: Why We Eat More than We Think" (Bantam, 2006), Wansink has researched how consumers read menus. After giving menus to subjects in the study, Wansink tracked their eyes using cameras fitted with infrared technology. His research found that in the absence of shaded boxes, starred items and font or color changes, a person's eye will move in a Z-shaped pattern beginning in a menu's upper left corner and moving to the upper right, down through the center, to the lower left and, finally, exiting at the lower right-hand corner. Many consultants contend that the dead center and the upper right-hand corner are the two menu "sweet spots," but Wansink encourages operators not to overlook the lower right corner. "A person will always leave a page menu in the lower right," he says.

Boxing items works well, too. "It's better than changing fonts and even a little better than changing color," Wansink says. But don't box menu offerings haphazardly, he cautions: Provide a justification for doing so. Something as simple as calling items "House Specials" should do the trick.

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Diners tend to read in a Z-pattern from the top left corner of a page to the top right, down the center and then to the bottom.



At Baker Bros, the most profitable items go at the top of their menu category, while those with higher food costs of one are listed at the bottom.



Redesigned menu at New Jersey's Zebu Forno highlight high-profit-margin items, and prominently displayed baked goods boost impulse buys.

